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Rethinking Reading in Teacher Education: Cavell's Emersonian Approach to Education

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I. Introduction

What do teachers do? Who are teachers? If these questions sound too vague, why don't we confine them by saying, "what do teachers do in school?" or "who are school teachers?" Some would say that they are the people who teach, mostly in classes, at school. This picture looks simple, but convincing. Still, what do they do by teaching after all? At this point, a rich discussion seems available — you can express opinions about possibilities, meanings, methods, aims and all other aspects of what teaching a subject is, and, of course, what teaching is or should be.

In Japan, however, a tragedy of recent conditions regarding teachers and the literature on teachers is such that they are virtually put into a position of having to teach less. Some researchers have even warned that teachers are increasingly more and more prevented from teaching. Shigeru Asanuma and Manabu Sato (2000, pp. 125-126), for instance, note that on average more than half of teachers' working time — which is growing — is consumed for handling "peripheral jobs," such as trivial paper work, bureaucratic committee meetings, and so forth. They analyze that, influenced by the rapid multiplication of different values in society, the demands of parents (and students, I assume) have increased and teachers are hemmed in by this (Asanuma and Sato 2000, p. 128). June Gordon's research also supports this claim. He concludes that many teachers feel that "parents' expectation

of teachers has changed drastically (2005, p. 464)." This change puts teachers to a position of dealing with "social behavior, manners, and decorum" of students —— sometimes under attack from rebellious students' linguistic and physical abuse —— as a matter of "utmost importance," instead of "academic preparation (Ibid.)." Under such circumstances, teachers are "fighting against the loss of their status" as "a honored profession" and "struggling to retain a posture. . . that would distinguish them from other white-collar workers (Ibid., 462)." Clearly, teachers in Japan are in turmoil, in terms of muddling with internal self-positioning and reacting to external threat as well.

Acknowledging this climate surrounding teachers and their teaching practices, this paper tries to respond to the question; what can teacher education do to help teachers rediscover their professional conduct, namely, teaching? The question will lead us first to explore Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The American Scholar," where he sets out his notion of the scholar, teacher, and student. Then, it will be seen how Stanley Cavell refines and revitalizes those ideas, by reading *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, Emerson's closest contemporary and colleague philosopher. Finally, the issue of teacher education will be argued in the light of Cavell's Emersonian reading of *Walden.*

II. The Rethinking of Reading in Teacher Education

A. An Image of Teacher as Learner: The American Scholar

At the beginning of this new section, let us ask again, "Who are teachers?" Are they merely business persons in the education market? Do they just try to satisfy the demands of students and parents by offering cutting-edge information, useful skills, or a healthier mind and body? If you think of this picture as being too sarcastic, what are the alternatives? How could we possibly redefine who teachers are in order to effect unprecedented, fast-moving, and wide-ranging social change? It seems possible though to seek examples from history and learn from them. Lawrence Buell says that Transcendentalists were, in nineteenth-century America, people who engaged in "a much less authoritarian teaching ethic than the traditional drill-and-recitation pedagogy that then prevailed." Transcendentalism led, according to Buell, to "a new vision of the human self," and "this vision," he continues, "was social, a vision of a transformed society." (2006, p. xxi) This helps us to ask; how does Emerson, the central figure of this movement, say about teaching and its nature in the context of exploring a departure from the conventional view of human beings,

society, and education in a transforming period of the nation? Here, we focus his most well known address, "The American Scholar," in which Emerson directly explicates his contentions on education, in particular, the notion of a person who learns and teaches.

In that address, as he elaborates the idea of the "American Scholar," Emerson boldly declares, "Is not, indeed, every man a student, and do not all things exist for the student behoof? And, finally, is not the true scholar the only true master?" (1990, p. 38) Here, by the words "every man" he means "Man Thinking," which is equivalent to the "Scholar" in his terminology (Ibid.). It is interesting to see that Emerson relates the notion of a student, who learns, to that of a scholar and master, who inquires and teaches. To put it differently, a teacher ought to be a person who learns, thinks, and inquires. One may ask, however, how does this idea differ from conventional sayings such as "teachers should always learn" or "teachers must know this and that to teach." In response to this, let us hear him saying: "One must be an inventor to read well. . . . There is then creative reading as well as creative writing." (Ibid, p. 42) Emerson implies that a teacher is not a person who is occupied with "traditional drill-and-recitation," nor one who retains such a tradition in and out of the classroom, in order to teach herself as well as the students. Rather, an Emersonian teacher seems to have characteristics of transforming what she literally reads and studies and, simultaneously and/or consequently, of transforming society.

This brings us back to the initial question but with more specific focus. How can teacher education, that helps and enhances the image of teacher as learner, be possible? "The American Scholar" itself actually speaks in terms of "the education of the scholar," where Emerson argues that it consists of education "by nature, by books, and by action." (Ibid, p. 45) Still, the question remains; what does such education look like? Though it is not difficult for us to go through the fifteen- or sixteen-page address by Emerson in a superficial way, his idea often seems puzzling and ambiguous; in other words, we need a teacher to read Emerson. This is the issue that the following section will explore further.

B. Cavell's Emersonian Reading of *Walden: The Senses of Walden*

Who is our teacher, then? Who could be the one to help us read Emerson's notion of the education of the scholar, namely, the education of the teacher? Naoko Saito (2001, p. 145) seems to have an idea of a suitable candidate. In her essay on

contemporary moral education, she puts great emphasis on Stanley Cavell's approach to Emersonian education. Cavell is indeed interested in Emerson, and, furthermore, he invents the notion of "Emersonian Moral Perfectionism" mainly based on his reading of "The American Scholar." (Cavell 2001, p. 36) Here, we focus on Cavell's work titled *The Senses of Walden* because; 1) the central issue of the book is the very idea of the reading; 2) and the strong, underlying connections with "The American Scholar" are recognized in his reading of *Walden.*

So how can Cavell help us to read Emerson's notion of "the education of the scholar"? Let us first look at two parts from *The Senses of Walden,* one is nearly at the beginning of the first section of the book, and the other is at the end of the final section:

> "To discover how to earn and spend our most wakeful hours — whatever we are doing — is the task of *Walden* as a whole; it follows that its task, for us who are reading, is epitomized in discovering what reading in a high sense is and, in particular, if *Walden* is a heroic book, what reading *Walden* is." (Cavell 1972, p. 5)

> "To allow the world to change, and to learn change from it, to permit it strangers, accepting its own strangeness, are conditions of know it now. This is why its knowledge is a heroic enterprise. The hero departs from his hut and goes into an unknown wood from whose mysteries he wins a boon that he brings back to his neighbors. The boon of Walden is *Walden.*" (Ibid., p. 119)

It is safe and fair to say that Cavell sustains his attitude of *Walden* as a heroic book, from the beginning to the end of this book. What does "a heroic book" mean, then? Why does this idea captivate Cavell so much? Cavell explains this idea as follows:

> "We started thinking along one line about what the writer of *Walden* calls "heroic books".. . . In Thoreau's adolescence, the call for the creation of an American literature was still at a height: it was to be the final proof of the nation's maturity, proof that its errand among nations had been accomplished, that its specialness had permitted and in turn been proved by an original intelligence. In these circumstances, an epic ambition would

be the ambition to compose the nation's first epic." (Ibid, p. 13)

Walden is, in Cavell's sense, a heroic book because it is the first epic of America, or, at least, the writing of *Walden* was the first serious attempt to write one. He also calls *Walden* as "an original, or initiating text." (Ibid. p. xiii) Thus, in Cavell, *Walden* is an original text of original intelligence. This originality is Thoreau's as well as his nation's, a nation which aims to mature its literature, society, and intellect. This makes *Walden* an epic of heroic enterprise.

A question emerges; where did this aspiration for an original text of original intellect originally come from? In order to respond to this question, it is necessary to revert to "The American Scholar." Emerson writes:

> "The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. It came into him, life; it went out from him, truth. It came to him, short-lived actions; it went out from him, immortal thoughts. It came to him, business; it went from him, poetry. . . . It now endures, it now flies, it now inspires." (1990, p. 40)

The image of the "scholar" described here naturally reminds us of the writer of *Walden.* The writer tries to write an epic of intellectual endeavor in the first age of creating his nation's literature. He rearranges the world surrounding him, by writing about it. It is not his life, but the immortal truth he found, that Thoreau really wants to describe through *Walden.* His stay at Walden pond lasted for two years, but *Walden* is still actively conveying its message in the twenty-first century, and it surely will continue to do so for centuries into the future. He does his business and it turns out to be a literary masterpiece that is full of words of economics. The masterpiece is, indeed, a heroic book and it inspires Cavell and, of course, us as well. Emerson also writes in "The American Scholar," "Each age, it is found, must write its own books. . ." (Ibid.) *Walden* is no doubt a book of its own generation, a book of the scholar.

It is emphasized here that the intention of the author is not to list all the pieces of textual evidence to connect Thoreau with Emerson. Rather, the point is to read how Cavell reads *Walden* in his book *The Senses of Walden.* According to the preceding paragraphs, it can be seen that Cavell's reading of *Walden* is Emersonian

(i.e., it shows the persistent influence of "The American Scholar"). This leads us to the presumption; in a Cavellian sense, that *Walden* is not the recording of sentimental solitude, but the reacting to, and the rewriting of, "The American Scholar." If this is the case, how is the central interest of the address, namely, the education of the scholar, described and found in *Walden?* This is discussed in the following section.

C. The Education of the Scholar in *Walden:* The Reading of Teacher Education

As seen above, significant parallels are recognized between Thoreau's book and Emerson's address in Cavell's reading of *Walden.* This section focuses on the link between them specifically with regard to Emerson's notion of the education of the scholar. Emerson states what specifically constitutes the education of the scholar; it is education through nature, books, and action. As for Cavell, he points out that there is "the underlying idea of nature as a book" in *Walden.* (1972, p. 26) There is also a sentence saying, ". . . heroic books are themselves a part of nature." (Ibid., p. 26) It is clear that Cavell relates the notion of nature to that of books. How about the concept of education by action? Cavell indicates that the writer of *Walden* engages in an act of writing. (Ibid., p. 25) Cavell also says, "[w]riting is a labor of the hands." (Ibid., p. 27) Here again, education by books plays the central role in education by action. In short, the writer tries to write a heroic book, which is a part of nature. The writing of such a book is an action. So what is, then, education by books all about? We have already seen that education by books contains the idea of creative reading as its central concept. Nevertheless, if *Walden* is a book about writing a heroic book, how could we possibly relate writing to reading? Also, how can we define what creative reading is, after all? Cavell states:

> "But in *Walden,* reading is not merely the other side of writing, its eventual fate; it is another metaphor of writing itself." (Ibid., p. 28)

Reading in a Cavellian sense is writing itself. To put it more precisely, reading in a high sense itself is writing a heroic book. Emerson would say that when reading is heroic, the reader gives what is read a new arrangement. It came to Emerson as business; it came out as poetry.

We can see this happen in *The Senses of Walden.* Cavell reads *Walden* and

rearranges it with his own mind and his own hands. That is the writing of his book. At the same time, he assumes that *Walden* is, in a sense, a rearrangement of "The American Scholar," as we have examined. This layered interaction between different texts and different minds demonstrates what Cavell means by "to allow the world to change, and to learn change from it." To allow the world to change is to allow the reading of your world to change. Once you allow the world to change, then you start to write, in order to change that new reading of the world. This does not mean that writing is just an explanation of one's reading, but it is important to stress that writing is a necessary part of the whole process of reading and vise versa. (Cavell directly compares "a mood of our acts of reading altogether" and "the problem of writing altogether" in *The Senses of Walden.* (Ibid., pp. 49-50)) Cavell says "Raising them [words] up, to the light, so to speak, is the whole thing he [the writer] does, not the adornment of it." (Ibid., p. 28) Reading in a high sense, or creative reading, is the elevation, declaration, and thus redemption of language.

Here, the education of the scholar becomes the conduct of the scholar as a whole. The scholar thinks, acts, and lives. At its center, the interconnected and perpetual practice of reading and writing is taking place. This conception of education is not divided into subjects, nor reduced to the achievement of targeted skills. The teacher's teaching is not merely the other side of leaning, its eventual fate; it is another metaphor of learning itself. The teacher reads words, and thus revitalizes the world. The teacher's words rearrange the world. Teaching is a personal journey of inner transformation for each teacher, and in the process, the world itself becomes transformed.

A good example of this is the Book of Ezekiel, as Cavell mentions; "It is Ezekiel who anticipates most specifically the condition of prophecy in *Walden:*" (Ibid., p. 17) Both Ezekiel and Thoreau are prophets as well as writers in captivity (Ibid., p. 18). Cavell understands a true prophet as a writer of a "heroic book," a chanticleer to waken people (Ibid., p. 39), and a visionary reader of the days at hand (ibid., p. 40). A prophet becomes one in the process of serving to make such community as ought to be. In this regard, Cavell's picture of prophet also confirms the connection between reading and writing. A prophet should read how her neighbors are captivated and what context shapes such condition. Her job is not completed until she verbalizes her contention to warn people. As soon as she starts to speak out, she should read context in which she has just been involved. Here, it is also a good place to see how Transcendentalists, specifically in Emerson as their

representative, responds to "the traditional drill-and-recitation pedagogy." (Buell 2006, xxi) Their response is not an easy and total denial of ordinary practices of education. An Emersonian educator (and a Cavellian prophet) should read texts in a society and context of the world, as the most basic and highest part of her calling. Thus, a point of Emersonian education is not in a matter of dichotomy between authoritarian and less authoritarian. Rather, its emphasis is on the entrance into the perpetuating project for the emancipation from captivity.

Finally, then, why don't we focus on teachers in school again? How could teacher education respond to the age of the dispersion of people's values and views towards teachers and schools? Using Cavell's words, teacher education is "not the adornment" of teachers. In other words, teacher education is not about teaching teachers to teach, in order to fit themselves into the worldview that someone updates day by day. Rather, it is something to which teachers, on their own, are committed through their words and deeds. According to the viewpoint of teachers as scholars, they are readers as well as writers. What do they read? They read the world, the society, the people —— including, and most importantly, themselves —— through language. So they rearrange, rewrite, and thus transform themselves and the world. Teacher education is, then, all about teachers' conduct as a whole through language, which is ordinary but creative. This makes their conduct a heroic enterprise.

III. Conclusion

This paper examined how Cavell's conception of reading works in the context of the education of teachers, many of whom are at a loss of direction in a period of confused values and directions. Emerson's image of the scholar displayed an image of a teacher who thinks and acts in the changing world. Then, Cavell's reading of *Walden,* from the viewpoint of Emersonian education, was discussed. This led to an analysis of the interplay of actions of reading and writing. As a consequence, teacher education started to reappear as an issue of teachers' conduct, in terms of "creative reading," or as a linguistic and intellectual enterprise to read and write the world, society, and themselves. Now the process of rethinking reading has begun, further questions emerge; for example, how could the richness of reading be enhanced through their ordinary conduct and language? This is something that will be explored through continued reading of Cavell, in particular, his philosophy of language.

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